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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a brief overview of existing requirements in the state of Texas for the certification of public school teachers (K-12) with regard to the field of speech communication. The paper outlines speech requirements: (1) in the high school curriculum; (2) for admission to most teacher education programs; (3) for teaching certification; and (4) for teaching certificate renewal. It then offers some reflections on how those requirements will impact communication programs (in higher education) in the state. (SR)

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Certification of Public School Teachers in the State of Texas: Trends and Impact on College Communication Programs

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Certification of Public School Teachers in Texas:
Trends and Impact on College Communication Programs

There is an oft-repeated statement in Texas: "Since the legislators can't do much about the economy or poverty, they mostly meddle with the school system." Since the days of Ross Perot's Blue Ribbon panel that led the fight for "no pass/no play" requirements for public high school students, the state of Texas continues to tinker with its public education program. Currently the focus is on teacher preparation. This position paper is an overview of existing requirements for those who desire a career in public K-12 education and some reflections on how those requirements will impact communication programs in the state.

After many years of debate, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) ruled in the summer of 1997 that all students graduating from a public high school in Texas would need to complete one credit of speech. The impact of this curriculum change is continuing to have an enormous impact on the hiring of school personnel. Schools which previously only offered speech courses as electives, now must make available a beginning speech course for every high school student. At a recent meeting of the Texas Speech Communication Association, one of the middle school teachers impacted by this new requirement told us that in her school district, she had been asked to prepare lesson plans for *school bus drivers* who had been drafted to teach speech classes. Temporary certification allows those who currently do not meet certification requirements to teach in public schools on a "temporary" basis. Therefore, in this school district the teaching of the basic communication course had been assigned to school bus drivers! There obviously is an increased demand for secondary teachers with certification to teach speech communication classes.

College Communication departments should be taking the initiative in encouraging more of their majors to pursue a teaching certificate, rather than waiting for the college advising department to suggest majors for incoming students. However, a proactive stance must also be coupled with information students will need about the teacher certification process.

Applicants for teacher education programs in Texas' colleges and universities must have already successfully passed the Texas Academic Skills Program (TASP) examination, as well as the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) exit test required for high school graduation. To be admitted to most teacher education programs students must meet the following requirements:

1. Minimum overall GPA of 2.5 with a grade of "C" or better in each teaching field and professional education course.
2. Completion of at least 6 hours of English composition classes with a grade of "C" or better.
3. Completion of a Basic Public Speaking course with a grade of "C" or better.

Again, it is evident that Communication Departments have an important role in preparing future teachers. Just as high school students must meet a communication curriculum requirement, so must college students.

When students have successfully completed the academic requirements for a teaching certification field, they must pass the ExCet Exam administered by TEA. For those seeking elementary certification, two tests are required in professional development and the elementary comprehensive. For those seeking secondary certification, there are two to three tests required: the Secondary Professional Development test and tests in each teaching field.

To add to this mix of competency and exit exams, beginning next year (1998) teacher preparation programs in Texas will "be rated in an accountability system," required by law and implemented by the State Board for Educator Certification (Day, 1997, p. 4A). If too many students from a university fail the ExCet exams for their teaching fields or professional development exams, that teacher education program will be placed on review. If the program does not improve in a three year time period, then it will lose its state accreditation. Passing rates determined by the board that are acceptable are 70% of all first-time test takers must pass the exam and 80% of all test takers must pass (the cumulative rate). Therefore, if any discipline area (e.g., communication) does not meet this standard, then that discipline/department could no longer offer classes that would lead to teacher certification. Another issue that complicates the accreditation process is that a college or university who allows a graduate of another institution to take the ExCet at their institution becomes responsible for that student's score even though the student may have graduated from another university. The state will eventually "not only look at the ExCET but at graduates' performance as beginning teachers" (Day, 1997, p. 4A).

There is a feeling among members of the State Board for Educator Certification (SBEC) that Texas must move to a renewable certificate rather than continuing the current lifetime teaching certificate. Advocates of this move say that making teachers accountable in the way we make medical personnel accountable through regular licensing procedures will raise the value of the teaching profession. Higher standards, they argue, will lead to higher pay. Currently, proposals being considered by the SBEC include the provision of 150 clock hours of continuing education or other educational instruction being completed over a 5 year period as a requirement for certificate renewal, a widening of teaching fields so that teachers could teach several different

disciplines, a probationary certificate for those in their first 2 years of teaching, and a continuing renewal process whereby teachers must renew their certificates on a regular basis. Professional communication associations, as well as university communication departments, can assist in this continuing education effort by providing programs and classes that will help meet this 150 clock hour requirement. Because of strong resistance by classroom teachers to the certificate renewal proposal, the SBEC has decided to make the move to a renewable certificate an option for those currently holding "provisional lifetime" certificates (Yeager, 1997, p. 1A). There is also some consideration being given to requiring colleges and universities to complete follow-up studies on their teacher education majors for a 2 year period following graduation. The target date for full implementation of these new standards is 2010.

This move to greater accountability continues the trend that we have seen in university education. Higher education institutions must accept the responsibility for their students' learning or lack thereof. If a student has a degree in hand, the institution now is being made accountable for that student's performance in the "real" world. For those of us who have considered public school education problems as disconnected and unrelated to our mission as college professors, it is time to realize that what and how we teach is intertwined with the success or failure of public school teachers.

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